GOVERNMENT PRIVATE MEMBERS IN ALBERTA

by

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The Legislative Internship Program, entering its twelfth year in Alberta, is designed to accomplish two major goals. On the one hand Interns act as a source of assistance for Members of the Legislative Assembly and on the other, Interns themselves gain a variety of experiences which, in their chosen career or in their communities, will serve to make them more competent citizens. It is not entirely clear which of these two objectives has priority. Indeed, it may be the case that both goals are considered equal and therefore it is largely left to the individuals involved to determine the content, and therefore the benefit, of the Internship.

Although some aspects of the program are highly structured, it is a structure based on the value of completing certain exercises rather than the substance of that particular exercise. For example, Interns are required to organize and participate in at least two public seminars. These seminars deal with one issue, often an issue that is controversial, political and timely. However, the benefit involved in the performance of these seminars, is not primarily that an Intern is informed on one specific issue but rather that Interns gain experience. There is organization, public relations, public speaking and of course, specialized research involved.

Another requirement of the Internship Program is that each Intern submit an academic paper. Again, it may be well argued that the purpose of writing a paper has more value as an exercise than in producing a treatise on the function of the provincial government. The academic paper provides the Interns with a form and an implied necessity to examine their experiences of the last year, to choose a major area of interest, and to record for posterity, their perceptions of some aspect of the political process in Alberta.

The substance of the paper however, is secondary. If this paper is meant to be a recapitulation and largely an opinion of some aspect of government, then its value as such in practical terms, is fleeting.

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Secondly, as an opinion, its merit will largely be judged with respect to the individual Interns. Perhaps forty years later, a particular paper will be thought to have been very perceptive or equally undiscerning but this will largely depend on the merit of the individual author. That is, if it is even ever again, read.

The written requirement of this program is called an academic paper. The reasons for calling these essays academic papers, are probably irrelevant but nonetheless, the term itself is incorrect. Interns have not been involved in a formal study of government nor has it been a theoretical study. The Internship, while providing an opportunity for some to compare their theoretical understanding of government with reality, is not an academic exercise. The Internship is an apprenticeship, a practical introduction to government. One is oriented to the structure, organization, politics, parties, administration and personal aspects of government in Alberta. It is an experience for the individual Intern which cannot help but be useful in almost any field of professional or community service.

The Internship, while being of great benefit to the individual Intern, is also designed to provide Private Members with assistance. Interns are called upon to do research, prepare material for the House and to help Members with their constituency work. By working with the individual Members, Interns are given an opportunity to view first-hand, what exactly it is that a Member of the Legislative Assembly does.

What exactly do MLA's do? While the Canadian political process, or at least the popular conception of the system, is deemed to be important, the answer to this question is far from the realm of the average person's common sense. Yet the individual Member is the focal point of government. While different Members have differing degrees of responsibility, they all share a common obligation to their constituents and to the larger and

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more abstract notion, of society in general.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the role of the Member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta in terms of that commonality. Based on interviews and personal observations, this paper is a practical reflection of one major aspect of the Internship - work with the MLA's.

In conducting my research for this paper I was able to interview twenty-two Government Private Members. The interviews were based on a common questionnaire, which although it contained some weaknesses, allowed for a general discussion on the role of the Member, the position of the Private Member vis-a-vis the Executive, the services available to members and the nature of remuneration. I also had an opportunity to discuss with members their personal reasons for seeking election. Some of the interviews took fifteen minutes, many lasted an hour or more and all were very interesting.

The first question I asked of the MLA's concerned the actual content of the work. Each member was asked to rank, in order of importance, four different responsibilities. These included their roles as representative, ombudsman, legislator and as a party person. An overwhelming majority stated that the representative role and the ombudsman role were their top two priorities. Only one member felt that the role as legislator took priority and none felt that the partisan role was very important. In fact, referring to their work as MLA's, sixteen members put their partisan role in a very distant fourth place.

As one would expect, I received a variety of different explanations for a particular ranking of priorities. Many members felt that their constituents were instrumental in designing their agendas while others felt that they had alot of freedom in deciding what they would concentrate their efforts on.

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The ideological commitment of members, their experience as MLA's, their personal ideas about government and a myriad of other reasons were offered for why an individual would place his or her highest priority in one particular area. What follows is a table of responses to the first question asked.

1. In fulfilling your duties as an M.L.A., how would you rank the following responsibilities. Please number these in order of importance.

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Representative Role (Spokesman for the Constituency)	8 (5)	12(1)	2(1)	0
Role as Ombudsman (Solving constituent complaints and problems)	13 (1)	7(5)	1(1)	1
Legislator Role (Participation in the law-making process of the Legislative Assembly)	1 (1)	3(1)	13(2)	5(3)
Partisan Role (Allegiance to your particular political party)	0	0	6(3)	16(4)

Of the twenty-two members who took part in the interviews, fifteen members represent rural areas and seven represent urban constituencies. This distinction may be apparently insignificant to anyone, save a seasoned observer of Alberta politics, but throughout the interviews it became increasingly clear that it was an important consideration.

In the first question for example, while 21 members ranked their role as ombudsman or representative first, only one urban member ranked their ombudsman duties as their highest priority. On the table I have shown in brackets, the responses of the urban members as a subset of the whole.

In asking this question, the representative role was defined as the responsibility to make sure that the particular interests of one's constituents were to be addressed. That is, a voice in expressing need or concern for any issue which falls withing the scope of government - a spokesman for the constituency.

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On the other hand, the ombudsman role was defined as solving constituent complaints and problems, advocacy with the bureaucracy and a general source of information.

Because government does have such a far-reaching and almost all-inclusive effect on the lives of citizens, it is quite reasonable that many members would spend the majority of their energy on assisting their constituents to understand it all.

If the purpose of government is to balance the interests of different individuals in an organized society and then because of these complex relationships, one needs an 'interpreter', then both the representative and ombudsman responsibilities are clearly important. In Canadian Legislatures: the 1984 Comparative Study, a survey was published measuring, among other things, whether or not people agreed that the best way to get information from government was to contact the Member of Parliament. One can assume from the context of other questions in the survey that this question could also include the Members of Provincial Legislatures or Parliaments. In Alberta, 43% of those surveyed strongly agreed and another 40% agreed somewhat with this statement$. (1)

It would be interesting to know the rural/urban make-up of the sample used in the survey or perhaps other demographic information because based on some of the comments made by Members, the results are incongruous. If one speaks with rural Members it is easily understandable that upwards of 80% of the population would have had experiences leading them to believe that the best way to get information was to contact the Member. Many rural MLA's would state for example that it was likely that they had had one kind of contact or another with 95% of their constituents. On the other hand, urban Members commented on the lack of contact with individuals. Furthermore, urban Members lamented the level of the population's involvement in politics or awareness of the duties of the MLA. One Member summed it up this way:

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"Albertans and Canadians for that matter, have a very top-heavy notion of government and they vote party not person." The Member was referring to the lack of attention that the electorate in general pays to the individual Member, especially if that Member is a backbencher.

However, simply because individuals do not contact their Members personally, which seems to be the case in urban areas, it does not necessarily mean that the elector is any more alienated or confused or apathetic than his rural counterpart. What is much more likely to be the case, is that because of the visibility and proximity of government offices, urban dwellers are more likely to contact a department with a specific concern, directly. This would also explain in part, why rural Members are more often called upon to access the bureaucracy, and provide information. On the other hand, my experience with urban members has been that most constituent enquiries are requests for action: for a change in the law or a change in the Members's position on a particular issue.

The answers I received to this question were definitely in line with my experiences with the Members here at the Legislature. But in another area they were quite out of line with my preconceived notions about the duties of MLA's in general.

I was quite surprised to find that only one member felt that his role as a legislator was of primary importance. I would suspect that the vast majority of people think that an MLA's primary task is to make laws and divise government policy. This does not seem to be the case for Government Private Members in Alberta. However, if one were to ask an Executive Member what his ranking of priorities would be, I would expect that the Legislator role would be considered most important.

However, because the legislator role is not given a top priority, it does not mean that private members pay little attention nor that they have

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little influence over the decision made. Subsequent questions in the survey indicate this.

When asked if the Members felt that adequate personal attention was given to all the legislation which affects their constituents, the response was split exactly in half and there was no significant variation between rural and urban members. Many members argued that with the committee system and the structure of caucus, the member himself would be at fault for not keeping up with legislation. On the other hand it was pointed out that a very great deal of government policy is determined by Cabinet and through regulation, thereby not allowing for full participation in the law-making process.

Question #5 asked: "Given our parliamentary system of government, whereby the process of legislation is left largely in the hands of the executive, do you feel that private members have adequate mechanisms to effect the law-making and policy decisions of the government?

Many members took issue with this question. It was often argued that Alberta has a unique caucus system one which allows for full participation in discussion and decision making. The premise was thought to be incorrect. However, five Members believe that backbenchers do not have an adequate voice in the legislative process and significantly all five of these members represent urban constituencies.

What is called caucus democracy and praised by some is called rigid discipline and derided by others. Yet all Members, in the final analysis, abide by this phenomena which one political analyst has termed "one of Lougheed's secret weapons". 2

Caucus has many functions, among them being to provide a forum and structure for intra-party and intra-government discussion and it also provides work for private members who otherwise, as is witnessed in other

jurisdictions, would have very little to do with legislation.

The purpose of the full caucus meetings is to allow for full and free discussion on any number of issues. Interestingly enough though, a highly structured agenda is presented and closely adhered to. This suggests of course, that there is ample opportunity for not dealing with a specific concern or at least for not allowing a member's particular cause to become a very high priority. In addition, ambition, pride, peer pressure and even friendship, often outweigh practical, regional and ideological concerns. It is probably true however, that in any organized group, large or small, there will be the tendency for one person or group of people who dominate or lead the general opinion. If it is true that the Alberta caucus is led and controlled by the Cabinet and perhaps even a smaller group of 'top' Ministers which has been suggested, it is not necessarily a concerted effort to diminish the voice of non-Executive Members.

Through caucus committees, backbenchers are given an opportunity to become very knowledgeable in certain areas and develop an expertise with which they assist the Ministers to prepare and study various peices of legislation. The range of committee activity varies considerably and the influence of a committee on the actions of a Minister also varies depending on the wishes of the Minsiter. The agendas of committee meetings are set by the Minister and are not public documents. 3

While the Alberta caucus structure may have much to do with party strategy and is an effective took for intra-government discussion it also has some adverse effects. Since May 1979, for example, caucus committees have been given the task of receiving representations from interest groups. Unfortunately though, because all caucus deliberations and even the agendas are secret documents, the public is put in the difficult position of participating in a game where the rules are not known and the context is undefineable.

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In addition the secrecy of caucus deliberations and caucus discipline or party solidarity, militates against the formation of dissenting opinion, not only within the government, but with the public at large. Further, because decisions and the timetable for the discussion of issues is secret, people are in effect disallowed full and fair participation in the decision making processs. While it is politically very important for the public to have confidence in their Government, one might wonder if playing strategy games with information is a very fair or even democratic way to achieve this end.

It can also be argued that the caucus system actually weakens the private members. While participation is encouraged, and though they may question Government policies, party discipline is such that once a decision is made, it has to be supported publicly and all members must vote with the Government. When talking about responsiblities in the house, one member said: "My job is to raise my hand at the appropriate time."

Caucus therefore, tends to undermine one of the most important functions of the Legislative Assembly, which is to privide the electorate with political food for thought and to assure the public that decisions are made through careful and balanced consideration of all factors involved. By consistently presenting a solid picutre to the electorate, the public is persuaded to believe that there is unanimity of opinion and therefore unquestionable merit in Government policy and legislation. This would certainly explain. the success and particularly the longevity of the Government Party in Alberta.

Aside from discussing the duties of Members, the questionnaire was also designed to find out how Members felt about their jobs: whether they considered it full-time or not, whether they thought it was appropriately salaried, and what their particular motivations were for seeking election.

All members were asked how much time they spend on their MLA duties, while the house is in session. I asked that the answer be based on a five-day week but all Members stated that their work week was seven days. However, based on a five day week, Members reported devoting between 12 and 18 hours a day to their work. The average was fourteen hours and there was no significant difference between rural and urban members. While the house is not in session members reported devoting an average of seven hours a day to their MLA duties.

While most members were emphatic about their jobs being full-time, many argued that this was a personal committment and by no means was it the case for all MLA's. In addition because of the way in which Members volunteered to take part in these interviews it is unlikely that my sample represents a true picture of all Members. It is interesting to note for example that only two of the twenty-two who agreed to the interview were otherwise employed. I would suspect that many MLA's who were too busy to take part represent that group of MLA's who treat their position as what it is intended to be - a part-time job. Many members commented that they had their hands overflowing with their MLA responsibilities and could not imagine how they could possibly pursue any other occupation without having something suffer.

Judging from my experience of not only what MLA's have to do but also having an idea of what they should do and most importantly what they could do, I do not understand how a part-time MLA could possibly accomplish very much. If a Member represents ten or sixty thousand people, acts as an ombudsman, is expected to be educator and debater on all legislation, participates in his political party and represent his Government, how can he occupy himself with another career. Members of the Legislative Assembly are, no doubt, very busy people.

It is interesting to note however that only one MLA out of twenty-two thought there should be any restrictions on an MLA's employment or business outside

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the legislature. Some, albeit few, even suggested that the present conflict of interest guidelines were too stringent.

Most argued that without some sort of outside occupation, MLA's would lose touch with reality - with what was going on in the real world. However, this is somewhat inconsistent with what this group of MLA's had in fact, done. With the exception of two, all the Members interviewed professed to have given up their businesses, or had given the management of their farms or businesses to other people or had left their previous employment. So, while they had given up their outside occupations, were working 14 hours a day and could not imagine how a committed MLA could do otherwise, none wanted to see any further restrictions placed on their activities. It is obvious though that many of the MLA's interviewed do not need any and furthermore that they have not suffered any loss of touch with the real world. Judging from their work and the contact that they have with their constituents, they may in fact have a greater balanced view of the real world than an otherwise employed, part-time, MLA who has not the time nor the energy to deal with all the concerns of his constituents.

It is then argued that in the final analysis, it is those same constituents who if they feel they have been short-changed by an otherwise occupied MLA, they have the power, to remove him from office. This is a difficult argument but probably erroneous based on an information factor. The most important lesson I have learned, having participated in the Internship, is how little I knew when I started and how much more there is to know about the Legislative Assembly of Alberta. Interns are chosen because they are reasonably well-educated, well-informed and often politically inclined before they even begin the program. Yet, what I knew about the function of the MLA, what I suspect great numbers of people know about their MLA's, was certainly not enough to judge the individual job performance of the Member. I am

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also quite surprised that although these things are sometimes mentioned at nomination time, they rarely are issues during election time. This I expect, is again a result of the electorate's notion that the vote is a vote for the party rather than for the person.

Most MLA's when questioned about their motivations for seeking election put community service and ideological concerns at the top of their lists. Very few admitted that salary, benefits or personal power had anything to do with their decision to run and seek re-election. This when one compares it to the dissatisfaction that Members expressed for their remuneration suggest two things.

It, first of all, suggests that Members are not in it for the money but that their general expectations of salary for the work that they do are indeed much higher. This in turn suggests that they must all have some other source of income, which in fact most of them said they did have. It also suggests that for especially those who are serving a second or subsequent term, there is a great deal of satisfaction in the position quite aside from the financial benefits.

In terms of remuneration then, most members felt that they were not adequately reimbursed for the work that they do. However, I can not imagine that most people in general feel they are adequately paid for their contributions to societythrough their work.

While salary and benefits were not considered as primary motivating factors for seeking election, nor in most Members' views should they be, they are certainly an attractive part of the position.

What follows is a brief description of the various services, benefits reimbursements, and indemnity of the members. While there is alot of variation, I have chosen to give a general description so as not to identify any particular member.

Every private member receives $24,310 in indemnity and an additional $7,150 in tax-free allowance. Members can also earn additional fees for sitting on any number of commissions, boards or committees. In 1984, these fees ranged from zero to an individual total of over $25,000. The average sum received by the Members who took part in the survey was approximately $4,500. 4

In addition members who live out of Edmonton, receive $75 per day while the House is sitting and $75 per day to a maximum of 24 days while the house is not sitting. In 1984 this subsistence allowance averaged $11,325. If members sit on committees, the per diem rate is set at $100 per day while the house is not sitting and all actual expenses are reimbursed.

Members are also reimbursed for all travel. They are entitled to unlimited air and bus transportation and are reimbursed for car travel. Car travel is limited to fifty-two round trips per year between the capital and the constituency and in addition members are entitled to an additional 15,000 kilometres of general travel throughout the province.

All members who have served at least five years receive a pension. Member contributions equal 7½% of all indemnities. The pension payable is the indemnity of the average of the highest three consecutive years and there is no maximum.

There is great variation in the total amount any one Member might earn as 'salary'. Benefits and pensions also vary but add considerably to the total income of the Member. In 1984, taking into consideration indemnity, subsistence allowance, benefits, travelling expenses, fees and miscellaneous expenses, most Private Members received well over $50,000. The range was from $36,000 for an otherwise employed urban MLA to $95,920 for an out-of-town, urban MLA. The average for all Private Members is $58,956. 5

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The average for my sample is $61,014. While this sum may seem quite reasonable, it should not be forgotten that these members must maintain a residence in Edmonton while the house is in session, travel extensively back and forth from and in and around their constituencies and all but two of the Members work full-time as MLA's.

If one considers the job to be part-time, remuneration would be considered exceptional. However, for a full-time job involving the responsibility, the opportunity cost, and the insecurity, it hardly seems reasonable. In fact, most young professionals earn more than this, albeit not including the travel or other expenses allowed. While many might argue that salary should not be a consideration in the motivation for seeking office, such an attitude ignores reality or suggest that such a position should be reserved for the wealthy.

However, raising salaries for public offices has always been a delicate issue politically. In Alberta, this is even more contentious because the position of MLA is thought to be a part-time job, is for many Members just that, and there are no restrictions nor is there any public accountability for the way in which a member performs his duties.

In 1973, the Ontario government commissioned a study on parliamentary reform which addressed this whole issue of full-time versus part-time MLA's.[5] Given the work-load of the Member and taking into consideration notions of public accountability the Camp Commission concluded that being a member of a provincial parliament should be considered and salaried as if it was, as it often in reality is, a full-time job.[6]

Members in Alberta, like MPP's in Ontario, in the main, are of the opinion that the sessions and work demands are such that being a member is a complete occupation even if they feel that this situation is unfortunate.

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Quoting from the Camp Commission, the purpose of making MLA's full-time is: "...to leave the Member, through our recommendations, with as little excuse as possible for diversion of his time and talents away from the exacting work of making law and examining administration and spending." 7 That is, to not only have a Member who acts as ombudsman, which hopes for re-election in many constituencies demand, but to give Members the means to devote their full attention to the arduous task of being a legislator.

Such a project, that of assessing the needs of MLA's, understanding the expectations of the electorate and balancing these two in view of more effective government through more effective Private Members, is not one to be undertaken lightly. It would be a process of examination of the entire provincial legislative system of which the question of full-time or part-time MLA's would be only part. It is also not something that can be done internally. The research involved, the inevitability of conflict of interest, the inability of Members themselves to be wholly objective and the fact that Members are not politically inclined nor available for such work, are all reasons for following Ontario's example.

That is, that an independent study be carried out as to the function of the Legislative Assembly with particular reference to the role of the Private Members and how their participation in the process of Government might be enlarged.

NOTES

1. Fleming, Robert J., and Mitchinson, J. Thomas, eds. Canadian Legislatures: The 1984 Study. Toronto, Office of the Assembly, 1984. p. 22

2. McCormick, Peter, "Politics After the Landslide", Parliamentary Government, Volume 4, Number 1, 1983. p.8

3. Alberta Teachers' Association., A Guide to Alberta's Twentieth Legislature. Edmonton, 1983. p. 21

4. Supplementary Information to the Public Accounts, 1983-84. Government of Alberta. Statement No. 1 pp. 1-1, 1-2.

5. Ibid.

6. Ontario Commission on the Legislature. Chairman: Dalton Kingsley Camp, Queen's Park, Toronto. May, 1973 First Report, p. 14-15

7. Ibid., p. 17

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